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Fear and Desire: Regional Aesthetics and Colonial Desire in Kate Chopin's Portrayals of the Tragic Mulatta Stereotype

by Dagmar Pegues

The interrogation of the category of race in Kate Chopin's fiction represents an essential dimension of regional aesthetics, and it offers an alternative view to previous interpretations that focus primarily on feminist themes. This article examines the role of Louisiana as a specific region in the construction of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Kate Chopin, primarily in her stories "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde," and by analogy in her most successful novel *The Awakening*. I propose to extricate Chopin's work from the virgin/whore dichotomy so often applied to white and non-white characters respectively.[1] From a new perspective, an illumination of the portrayals of the tragic mulatta figure in Chopin's texts invites a reconsideration of the stereotype of the tragic mulatta that typically oscillates between evocations of the exotic and the sentimental. Attempting to reclaim the category of race in regionalist fiction by examining the tragic mulatta stereotype in the selected texts, I see parallels between this pervasive image of southern local color fiction and the post-colonial paradigm, i.e. the dichotomy of the colonizer versus the colonized as it is suggested by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* as well as the notion of stereotype as a form of normalizing, yet contradictory, judgment in Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. From this perspective, the trope of the tragic mulatta appropriated by Chopin in her fiction represents an essential point of concurrence of the issues of gender, race, and region, and it points to the underlying racial anxiety manifested by the existence of ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward

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the racial Other. Consequently, the internalization of colonial commodification of the racially Other can be interpreted as the true tragic element in the tragic mulatta stereotype, with allusions to Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse and Patricia Yaeger's "reconfigurations of southern body politics" (2). Above all, such a paradigm shift effectively displaces the role of this stereotype as a form of warning against miscegenation. While displacing the virgin/whore dichotomy applied to the white and black womanhood respectively, this examination uncovers the paradoxical nature of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist discourse that shifts the interpretative framework from the virgin/whore dichotomy to the fetishization of the black body, which is rooted in the (strongly sexually charged) feelings of power over the racially Other, which simultaneously coexist with the feelings of anxiety and fear directed towards racial Otherness.

Furthermore, this article interprets the portrayals of the tragic mulatta stereotype in Chopin's stories "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde" as indications of the ambivalent economy of (sexual) fear and desire, rather than as strict applications of the virgin/whore stereotypes. This ambivalence is exemplified primarily by examining one plateau of the sexualized stereotype of the dusky-eyed, exotic quadroons and octoroons, i.e. the desirability of their bodies for their white masters, which paradoxically underlies the perpetuation of the white southern hierarchy, as well as by examining portrayals of (sexual and non-sexual) violence and victimization of the black body—whipping, rape, drowning, neglect, and so forth—which resulted from the fear of the visible racial Other as well as hybridity and invisible blackness.

Moreover, I suggest that Kate Chopin not only acknowledges the sexual desirability of the tragic mulatta, but also allows Edna Pontellier, a white middle class wife from New Orleans, to appropriate the sexuality that is traditionally associated with the racially Other. However, since Chopin has been exposed to the unique local perceptions of race, her short fiction offers an engagement with the issue of race that ultimately transcends the exoticism of the genre of *local color* precisely by expressing, in different degrees, the ambivalent feelings of fear and desirability of the racially Other characters that are informed by the Louisiana regional epistemology of race.

As a result of the suggested theoretical framework, it is also becoming increasingly evident that the racial discourse, as it is present in the fiction of Chopin, distinctly differs from the appropriation of questions of racial issues by her literary predecessors, the (white, northern) abolitionist

authors, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852) or Lydia Maria Child (*The Quadroons*, 1842) who exploited the tragic mulatta stereotype in their fiction. Both Stowe and Child adopt the tragic mulatta stereotype primarily as a rhetorical device for the purpose of abolition of slavery. Arguably, the main objective of these fictional portrayals of the tragic mulatta within the genre of domestic/sentimental tradition was to address the questions of national identity, and to promote the idea of national unity by exciting the readers' feelings of pity and sympathy by showing how slavery was becoming "whiter." As Eve Raimon points out, "the trope of the 'tragic mulatto' embodies and dramatizes [the] profound tensions and paradoxes of race and nation. At the same time as these seemingly contradictory currents were manifesting themselves in the social order, the literary mulatto emerged as a favorite theme of antislavery fiction" (93).

Such parallel interrogations of race and nation, as they are illuminated by Stowe's analogy between family reunion and national reunion, which utilize the black/white binary, are incongruent with the coexisting local hierarchy in the New Orleans region in the late-nineteenth century. This is mainly due to a strong Creole presence in New Orleans, a truly multicultural city. As Robert Alexander explains, quoting from Arnold Hirsh and Joseph Logsdon's *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*: "Numbering nearly 20,000 in 1840 and 11,000 as late as 1860, these free people of color 'composed a fully articulated community with complex class structure, that occupied far more than the fringes of society'" (Alexander 125). The existence of free people of color thus disrupts the idealized national binary notions of race. Chopin witnessed Creole power and integration into the community, not as second-class citizens but as equal members of the community. The paradigm shift from the utilization of the tragic mulatta as an abolitionist trope to the ambiguous stereotype functioning as a tool of the specific Louisiana "colonial" discourse is thus motivated by the specific Creole threat, the fluidity of race, the breach of boundaries, and ultimately by the competition between the southern belles and New Orleans octoroons.

The works of Kate Chopin's literary predecessors, who invoked the tragic mulatta stereotype primarily to support the cause of abolition, are therefore seen as incongruent with the regional appropriation of this stereotype in "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde." In fact, the Louisiana ideological framework constitutes the tragic mulatta figure primarily as a threat to the southern hierarchy. For instance, Zoraïde's refusal of assimilation of whiteness is seen by her mistress as a subversive action

that deserves punishment; yet, paradoxically, it is precisely Zoraïde's close resemblance to the ideal of beauty that empowers her and that allows her to "disappoint" the expectations of her mistress.

Nineteenth-century readers could more easily relate to the tragic mulatta heroine and pity her if she closely resembled them in her visage and behavior. As Sterling Brown argues, it is a "curious piece of inconsistency on [the abolitionists'] part, an indirect admission that a white man [and woman] in chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed" (159). This inherent paradox partially disregards the darker-skinned slaves and supports the perpetuation and appropriation of the privileges of whiteness. Another important difference constituted by Chopin and her appropriation of the tragic mulatta from her abolitionist predecessors is the lack of the identification of the "white female liberators." As Kathy Davis examines the history of the tragic mulatta figure that was introduced into the literary canon by Lydia Maria Child, she exposes the role of the doubling white female figures who function as potential liberators in the tragic mulatta stories, and she argues that

> this trope of sisterhood [can be interpreted] as a sign that these tales are ultimately more concerned with issues of white female identity and empowerment than with black women's lives. In this reading, the "black" female protagonists are little more than surrogates, mere vehicles for white women's meditations on the tabooed subject of their own vulnerability to sexual violence. (2)

This inherently race-conscious figure who would speak "to the concerns of the free women readers . . . who were wrestling with their duty to female slaves" (Yellin 73) is clearly absent from the stories penned by Kate Chopin, who explores the tragic mulatta figure as a Louisiana social reality.

Recent interpretations of the role of racial stereotypes in the fiction of Kate Chopin have predominantly focused on female stereotypes interpreted strictly in terms of the virgin/whore dichotomy of white and black womanhood, respectively. Anne Goodwyn Jones, for example, situates this dichotomy within the Louisiana power hierarchies:

> Those basic Western myths [brought by the southern colonists along with their patriarchal social and familial assumptions] polarized women into the "virgin, pure and untouchable, and the prostitute, dangerously sexual." The clustering of images–goodness and light with virginity, evil and darkness with sexuality–seemed to be

> reified and therefore confirmed when white planters owned black slave women. Race and sex thus fused to create in the "white lady" the southern version of the nineteenth century's cult of true womanhood. (12)

The examination of the virgin/whore dichotomy is certainly relevant for the illumination of the gender roles and stereotypes of the antebellum South. Its relevancy is extended to the tragic mulatta stereotype by, among others, Ellen Peel and Christine Palumbo-DeSimone. For instance, in her essay "Race, Womanhood, and the Tragic Mulatta. An Issue of Ambiguity" Palumbo-DeSimone argues that "Armand is the truly tragic mulatto in 'Désirée's Baby,' for he has not only lost his family but has inculcated the racist values which must now lead him to self-loathing" (132). Yet, she does not reflect on the internalization of the "racist values" by Désirée herself, who is "literally lost"; and she further ascribes the source of Désirée's tragedy "not [to] her assumed 'taint' [but to] the system of racial and sexual oppression [where] the white patriarchal system is the 'taint'" (132). Therefore, although the mulatta is a racially ambiguous figure, she is interrogated by Palumbo-DeSimone primarily in terms of "men's anxiety about women's sexuality" (127) rather than in terms of racial fear from the *racially* Other and the interrogation of absolute racial categories. Such criticism, though relevant, cannot offer an effective exploration of Désirée's situation of double colonization.

Recent scholarship also appropriates the tragic mulatta stereotype for exploration of questions of (American) identity and nationality. Drawing parallels to Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness, Eve Raimon in her recent study *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited* argues that the trope of the tragic mulatto or mulatta is appropriated for interpretations entailing questions of nationality and identity of modern America and foreshadowing the concepts of hybridity and *mestizaje*: "Literally embodying both Northern and Southern ideologies, the 'amalgamated' mulatto (to use the contemporaneous term) can be viewed as quintessentially American, a precursor to contemporary motifs of 'hybrid' and 'mestizo' identities" (4). Such an appropriation of the tragic mulatta stereotype invites interpretations of this literary trope as a symbol of ambiguity and a call for equality.

I argue that within the context of the nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist discourse, the ambiguity of the tragic mulatta figure is not limited solely to an examination within the framework of the virgin/whore dichotomy or in relation to the symbol of national/family unity;

but, more importantly, that it should be interpreted as a stereotype arising from the sexualized fetish of the colonial discourse, as delineated by Homi Bhabha in the following manner:

> I argue for the reading of the stereotype in terms of fetishism. The myth of historical origination–racial purity, cultural priority–produced in relation to the stereotype functions to 'normalize' the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal. . . . The fetish of stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse. (74–75)

In the context of the examination of the work of Kate Chopin, the fetishization of the black body, i.e. the fear of the racial Other and a coexistent desire projected toward the body of the tragic mulatta, embodies the complex and paradoxical nature of stereotype as a confluence of knowledge and power, but also fantasy and pleasure, which ultimately reveals not only the dominant power of those who create and circulate those stereotypes but also their anxieties and fears. The interrogation of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Kate Chopin in accordance with Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse further allows us to access the multivalent function of the local epistemology of race, as it is specific to the Louisiana region at the turn of the nineteenth century, without reducing the tragic mulatta figure to a trope of abolitionist fiction or a sentimentalist pseudo-romantic heroine. As a result of the application of such an ideological framework, the attempts to assert absolute statements about the racial Other ultimately fail to offer an accurate perspective on the racial hierarchies and codifications of race. As interpreted by Toni Morrison in her series of lectures *Playing in the Dark*, fetishization is

> evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery. (68)

Clearly, this element of (sexual) fear is most frequently manifested in terms of violence on the black body. The examination of the phenomena of fear and desire directed toward the black body, which encourage the tragic mulatta stereotype, is thus parallel to Patricia Yaeger's attention to the body within the context of the new southern studies—primarily via the examination of the trope of a body merging with water or earth that, under the rubric of *reverse autochthony*, explores the sites where "both grownups and children are hurled into water or earth without proper rituals, without bearing witness to grief, without proper mourning" (17).

Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" exhibits examples of the productive ambivalence of fear and desire manifested in the portrayals of the black body. Therefore, the appropriation of Bhabha's formula of fetishism of colonial discourse adequately addresses the focal problem of racial stereotypes in the fiction of Kate Chopin, and thus further expands the traditionally applied framework that utilizes primarily the virgin/whore dichotomy.[2] Bhabha specifically appropriates the theory of fetishism for his theory of colonial discourse where, unlike sexual difference, "skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' . . . and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies" (78). Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" captures similar racial dramas resulting from Louisiana's unique history of race relations that offered its residents a "rich mélange of French, African, Anglo, and Spanish cultures. While other southern states during slavery enacted segregation and anti-miscegenation laws, in Louisiana blacks and whites mixed freely in the Catholic Church, in the street, and at quadroon balls" (Gunning 114). The acute visibility of the Other race and its place within the context of Louisiana local epistemology compelled Chopin to construct fictional accounts of characters of the Other race, since the absence of any degree of interrogation of racial issues would seem implausible within the context of the late nineteenth-century Louisiana.[3]

The application of Bhabha's theory of fetish in colonial discourse to examinations of Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" uncovers the underlying contradictory beliefs about the racially Other characters and the subsequent construction of racial stereotypes that embody such contradictory beliefs. The ambivalence of colonial discourse that describes "wanting one thing and its opposite (also 'simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action')" (Young 161) is adequately appropriated by Bhabha to open new possibilities of understanding

racial knowledge. With respect to Chopin's fiction, this approach allows for replacing the role of the tragic mulatta existing within the limits of the virgin/whore dichotomy or as the symbol of national/family unity. "Désirée's Baby" constructs the black (mulatta) body in terms of both desire and fear in the most noticeable manner. As summed up by Ellen Peel in her article "Semiotic Subversion in 'Désirée's Baby,'" the crux of the racial dramas in Chopin's short fiction is the following: "A form of poetic justice ensures that the same one-drop rule that enables him to keep La Blanche as a slave [and a mistress] causes him [Armand] to lose Désirée as a wife" (227–228). Within the context of Chopin's fiction, these contradictory emotions of fear and desire toward the racially Other that constitute the tragic mulatta stereotype in "Désirée's Baby" can be extended by analogy to Edna Pontellier, the main character of Chopin's master novel *The Awakening*, whose struggle to harmonize her authentic (passionate) identity with her submissive (maternal, marital) social role gives rise to a metamorphosized tragic mulatta figure. The racial hybridity of the tragic mulatta stereotype in Chopin's short fiction is mirrored by the multi-dimensional hybridity of Edna in *The Awakening*. Edna's "hybridity" is not limited to the most obvious fact that she attempts (unsuccessfully) to encompass both her sexual and artistic passion as well as the socially prescribed role defined by sexual purity and submissiveness. *The Awakening* invites interpretations of Edna as a "hybrid" character on several other levels. Most importantly, it is the clash between her Kentucky Protestant background and the Catholic environment in Louisiana that singles out her sense of "not belonging." Equally important is her "Americanness" that is juxtaposed with the Creole identity of the other characters, which she attempts to assume. Her transition from the mortal to the mythic realm that "elevates the novel from being a mere clinical study of woman's manic-depressive tendencies or a cliché about the plight of 'fallen' women to a tale of a tragic heroine" (Hailey-Gregory 309) can also be interpreted as another level of Edna's tragic hybridity that resonates with the tragic mulatta figure.

There are manifold associations of the racially mixed characters in "Désirée's Baby," however ambiguously presented by Chopin, with desire. Primarily, it is the character of Désirée, a foundling of uncertain origin who is consequently suspected by her father, husband, the readers, and probably by Chopin herself to be of racially mixed origin, who is associated with the phenomenon of desire on multiple levels. Most evidently, as Ellen Peel points out, it is the name of Désirée

itself that signifies that she is an object of desire. This is clearly portrayed in Chopin's story: "She was a foundling adopted by Madame and Monsieur Valmondé. Like a queen and king in a fairy tale, they were delighted by her mysterious arrival and named her Désirée, 'the wished-for one,' 'the desired one'" (242). Thus, Désirée is primarily portrayed by Chopin as an object of strong maternal and paternal love. Indeed, Madame and Monsieur Valmondé are eager to embrace the mysterious arrival of Desirée and welcome her with utmost care and affection:

> In time, Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficient providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé. (242)

By the same token, Désirée is the object of Armand Aubigny's infatuation and sexual desire. In fact, she is portrayed by Chopin as a woman who is able to suddenly entice Armand's passion despite her obscure origin and lack of prestigious family name: "Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her [Désirée] there, had fallen in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. . . . The passion that awoken in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or anything that drives headlong over all obstacles" (242).

Another racially mixed character of "Désirée's Baby" who is associated with desire is La Blanche, one of the quadroon maids at the Aubigny plantation. However, the association of La Blanche with sexual desire is less pronounced and requires more attention to the details of the story. Nonetheless Chopin suggests, however subtly, that La Blanche is also an object of sexual desire for Armand Aubigny. First, the unsuspecting Désirée reveals Armand's presence in (or near) La Blanche's cabin: "And the way he [the child] cries . . . is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin" (243). Later, the resemblance between one of La Blanche's little quadroon boys and her own child unveils the reality to Désirée, although she remains unaware of the full implication of this resemblance, i.e. her husband's probable sexual exploitation of La Blanche.

Ellen Peel addresses the doubling in the story of Désirée and La Blanche by pointing out that "the two women–and even their sons–may have parallel ties to Armand because of the possible sexual connections between slave and master" (226). Therefore, La Blanche is a living example of miscegenation, a personification of the one-drop-rule and its result-

ing phenomenon of "invisible blackness" for she is equally fair as Désirée and much fairer than Armand who is considered white until the secret of his origin is discovered at the end of the story:

> Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire . . . and it was he [Armand] who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze. . . . The last thing to go was . . . part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love—"But above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery." (247)

Armand Aubigny, who thus acquires the position of a tragic mulatto himself at the end of the story, is also portrayed as an object of desire to Désirée and his sexual attractiveness may be, perhaps in a limited manner, extended to La Blanche. Not only is Armand the proud owner of "one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana" (Chopin 242), but Désirée continues to desire the love and respect of her potentially unfaithful husband after the realization of the baby's racial heritage becomes common knowledge in the parish. She is desperate because of Armand's cold refusal of herself and their child that results from Armand's paradoxical internalization of the white anxiety regarding the racial Other. When Madame Valmondé urges Désirée to return to the Valmondé home with her child, Désirée still wishes to remain by her husband's side: "She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back. " 'Good-by, Armand,' she moaned. He did not answer her. That was his last blow of fate" (246).[4]

The (sexual) desirability of the black body in "Désirée's Baby" is further appropriated and significantly reinvented by Chopin in her most accomplished novel *The Awakening*. Clearly, there are numerous parallels between the stigmatized character of Désirée Aubigny, who is fashioned in full correspondence with the tragic mulatta formula, and the fated character of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. However, there is one parallel that is crucial to our interpretation of Chopin's employment of the tragic mulatta stereotype. This parallel should be sought in Edna's internalization of Otherness. As argued by Michele Birnbaum, "it is actually Edna's generalized identification with—rather than her alienation from—the marginalized which both affirms her class position and allows

her to critique the sexual constraints associated with it" (304). Indeed, in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is portrayed as a similarly fated character as the tragic mulatta. She is also balancing between two irreconcilable identities: an authentic identity of a woman filled with passion and an (involuntarily) assumed identity of an objectified virtuous wife. Resulting from the strong dichotomy of passion and purity, the members of the Creole society in *The Awakening* attributed sexual desire exclusively to the 'dark' female characters, such as Mariequita. Accordingly, the sensuality of the Creole women was thematized solely through motherhood. Indisputably, it is Adèle Ratignolle who is characterized essentially as performing the role of a dutiful mother in *The Awakening*. In Chopin's words she is "one of the mother-women [who] seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. . . . They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (529). Arguably, Edna's refusal of the traditionally prescribed gender role within the framework of the passion/purity dichotomy and her newly awakened sexual desire, which is symbolized by the sea, contaminates the "whiteness" of her social status by "dark" passion.[5]

As a result of the exploitation of the virgin/whore dichotomy, and from the racial-binary point of view of the antebellum middle-class society, Edna's actions stigmatize her with an irreversible sign of metamorphosized blackness because she "violated the expectations of her genteel readers by showing that sexual passion is no respecter of class or caste boundaries" (Elfenbein "American" 293). Consequently, Chopin portrays Edna as assuming the same outcast status as the tragic mulatta. Ultimately, her determination to escape the torment of such a dual existence finally results in her self-sacrifice to the depth of the ocean at the end of the novel. Appropriating desire that is predominantly associated with the racially mixed characters in nineteenth-century Louisiana local color fiction, Edna herself becomes similarly stigmatized as the tragic mulatta. The desire for the racially Other present in Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" is thus reinvented in *The Awakening* by Edna Pontellier's appropriation of sexual desire.[6]

The simultaneous attraction and repulsion from the racially Other is further evident in the dimension of racial fear that is also present in "Désirée's Baby." This dimension is clearly traceable to the convention of nineteenth-century American regionalist literature and its presentation of the white racial anxiety, which constitutes the basis of the portrayals of white supremacist violence that implicates blackness as undesir-

able. As Sandra Gunning argues in her examination of late-nineteenth-century American and African American literary discourses on white supremacist violence, "unlike Thomas Dixon, Chopin was not reared in the shadow of the Ku Klux Klan, but both her childhood in St. Louis before the Civil War and her marriage to a racially loyal white Southerner tied her on the one hand to the memory of slavery, and on the other to the violence of white supremacy itself" (113). Furthermore, as Gunning points out, Chopin's "southern experience on which [she] drew heavily to shape her white characters has the potential to complicate considerably how we read her representation of whiteness, and specifically of white masculinity" (113). In fact, Chopin was directly exposed to her husband's devotion to the Crescent City White League that was one of the many organizations formed in reaction to the postbellum Louisiana racially polarized context and pledged the maintenance of the supremacy of the white race.

The textual evidence of Chopin's appropriation of violence on the black body in "Désirée's Baby" further supports the appropriation of Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse that is constituted by ambiguity. "Désirée's Baby" reflects the complex "worlds of New Orleans, Clouterville, and the Cane River valley in which Kate Chopin set her local color stories [that] had their own violent racial past, which undoubtedly became part of the fabric of both her southern identity and her southern writing" (Gunning 114). Paradoxically, it is primarily Armand who, in correspondence with his assumed social role of a white planter, inflicts violence on the slaves on his plantation: "Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime" (243). Furthermore, Armand's decision to whip or not to whip his slaves is portrayed not as a deliberate decision including reflection on its consequences, but as a mere whim depending on his mood: "He [Armand] hasn't punished one of them–not one of them–since the baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work–he only laughed and said Négrillon was a great scamp" (244). The infliction of violence on Armand's slaves is portrayed neither as necessary nor as deliberate; rather, it is an outlet for Armand's own frustration. After the realization of the situation regarding his newborn baby, Armand turns to violence on his slaves: "He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves" (244).

The main motif of violence on the tragic mulatta body, however, is undoubtedly Désirée's foreshadowed suicide and the infanticide of her baby. Similarly to Edna Pontellier, Désirée is last seen walking toward the bayou with her baby in her arms:

> She [Désirée] did not take the broad beaten road which lead to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds. She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again. (246–247)

As Ellen Peel appropriately points out, "like the suicide of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, Désirée's disappearance is hardly a triumph" (236). As a result of the analysis of Désirée's *coup de grace* in accordance with Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse, we may claim that the fact that Désirée's internalized system of oppression to black identity allows her to commit infanticide of her mulatto baby (however ambiguously foreshadowed) suggests that Désirée's tragedy does not stem primarily from the system of patriarchal oppression, but from the fetishization of the racial Other. This aspect of Désirée's actions resonates with Toni Morrison's portrayal of Sethe in her novel *Beloved*, as examined by Mary Jane Suero Elliott:

> [Sethe's] internalized system oppressive to black identity informs her motivations for killing her child. . . . Her internalization of the lessons of commodification encourages Sethe to act, in a highly problematic attempt to save her children from commodification, as if they are not only extensions of herself, but also her possessions. (189)

Furthermore, the mulatta figure in "Désirée's Baby" is portrayed conventionally as a solitary figure. Ellen Peel argues that Désirée "fails to acknowledge ties with anyone outside the family who belongs to her sex or to her newly attributed race and class" (236). By analogy, this solitary status also applies to Edna Pontellier, who is seen by Margo Culley as a solitary soul. Furthermore, according to Culley, *The Awakening* is "an existential novel about solitude" (247). The tragic mulatta in Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" and the metamorphosized tragic mulatta in *The Awakening* can thus be viewed not only as victims of the passion/purity dichotomy but also as victims of slavery's commodification of the "colonial subject" as well as victims of the imposed isolation and lack of community structures.

Chopin's short story "La Belle Zoraïde" also addresses situations where the ambivalent feelings of racial fear and desire are manifest and where "the dominant being is at stake in the constructed field of the dominated [and] the privileged being is always defined by the underprivileged position of the dominated" (Suero Elliot 193). Chopin does not hesitate to interrogate not only the issues of dominance and submission but also the role of sexuality in the constitution of such power structures. Indeed, this story about Zoraïde's misplaced maternal love offers abundant portrayals of the sexualized images of the black body. La belle Zoraïde—the "beautiful Zoraïde"—is described in the following manner:

> La belle Zoraïde had eyes that were so dusky, so beautiful, that any man who gazed too long into their depths was sure to lose his head, and even his heart sometimes. Her soft, smooth skin was the color of *café-au-lait*. As for her elegant manners, her *svelte* and graceful figure, they were the envy of half the ladies who visited her mistress, Madame Delarivière. (312–313)

Surprisingly, in "La Belle Zoraïde" Chopin also offers a radically sexual depiction of a male black body with her portrayal of le beau Mézor—the beautiful Mézor—whom "Zoraïde had seen . . . dance the Bamboula in Congo Square. . . . Mézor was as straight as a cypress tree and was as proud looking as a king. His body, bare to the waist, was like a column of ebony and it glistened like oil" (313). In fact, the incorporation of the phallic symbols of a cypress tree and a column of ebony allow us to interpret Chopin's depiction of the male black body in "La Belle Zoraïde" as radically eroticized. Furthermore, it is significant that la belle Zoraïde witnesses le beau Mézor dancing the Bamboula, an "African dance, accompanied by the 'bamboula,' a small drum or tambourine made from a large bamboo joint. Popular among blacks in the nineteenth century, the dance begins slowly and builds into a sexualized frenzy" (Ewell and Menke 184). It is important to point out, however, that in "La Belle Zoraïde" Chopin offers sexualized images of the black male body without including any explicit references to bestiality or savagery. Abandoning the conventional treatment of black male sexuality as savage or brutal, Chopin captures an important dimension of interracial desire, an element clearly active in the formation of the Louisiana power structures and their response to the racialized Other.

Furthermore, the sexual attraction of le beau Mézor escalates in the moment when Zoraïde desires the black, proud Mézor who, when he was

not dancing Bamboula at the Congo Square was "hoeing sugarcane barefoot and half naked, in his master's field" (Chopin 314), more than the sophisticated mulatto 'M'sieur' Ambroise who has embraced the "white" values. In fact, Zoraïde's sentiment toward Ambroise is more than that of indifference: "M'sieur Ambroise was then the body servant of Doctor Langle. La belle Zoraïde detested the little mulatto, with his shining whiskers like a white man's, and his small brown eyes, that were cruel and false like a snake's" (313). As soon as Zoraïde discloses to her mistress her true reason for refusing to marry Ambroise, *i.e.*, her love for le beau Mézor, Madame Delisle is shocked to her utmost capacity by the choice her protégé has made: "'That negro! that negro! Bon Dieu Seigneur, but this is too much!" (314).

At the crux of this story Chopin purposefully juxtaposes the choice made by Madame Delisle for Zoraïde and the choice that Zoraïde makes for herself. Both of these choices are determined by the skin-color of the potential husband. Madame Delisle insists on choosing a husband for Zoraïde who is as "white" as he can be, given the fact that she is racially mixed. As Judith Berzon writes, "this story is particularly ironic because the racial prejudice which destroys the lovely mulatto girl is not her own but her mistress's and *it is not the white woman's hatred for the girl, but rather her love that destroys Zoraïde*" (102, emphasis added). Zoraïde, on the other hand, chooses a character as dark as possible: "Since I am not white, let me have from my own race the one whom my heart has chosen" (314). Anna Elfenbein addresses this instance of Zoraïde's resistance by pointing out her inability to internalize the racist values in the following manner: "Raised to be as close an approximation of the 'lady' as possible considering her race, Zoraïde is crushed because she refuses to marry the man her mistress has chosen for her. . . . Zoraïde has failed to internalize her white godmother's racist values" (*Women* 132–133). Furthermore, commenting on the central theme of this short story, Emily Toth argues in her critical biography of Kate Chopin that in "La Belle Zoraïde" Chopin transcends the white benevolent paternalism by refusing to portray Zoraïde as a happy slave and, moreover, suggests parallels between Zoraïde's decision and Chopin's own insistence on free will:

> Kate Chopin—the daughter of slave owners—looked on the thoughtless white world through the eyes of a woman of color, at a time when her Louisiana contemporaries Grace King and Ruth McEnery Stuart were still writing about happy slaves and tragic

> octoroons. Kate Chopin's Zoraïde, like the black woman in Chicago—and like Chopin herself—insists on her own free will and her own destiny. (222)

However, such an existentialist interpretation of "La Belle Zoraïde" is complicated by Zoraïde's response to her mistress's manipulation and the violent refusal of her own daughter and her misplaced motherly love:

> It was Madame herself who led the pretty, tiny little "griffe" girl to her mother. . . . "Here," said Madame approaching, "here my poor dear Zoraïde is your own little child. Keep her; she is yours. No one will ever take her from you again." Zoraïde looked with sullen suspicion upon her mistress and the child before her. Reaching out a hand she thrust the little one mistrustfully away from her. With the other hand she clasped the rag bundle fiercely to her breast; for she suspected a plot to deprive her of it (316–317).

In addition, in both "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde," we can detect not only violence and neglect directed toward the black body but also a unanimous refusal of the possibility of a functional bi-racial family. The isolation of the tragic mulatta figures is thus underscored by the acute lack of motherly love in their lives, as in the case of Zoraïde (Désirée has known the love of her surrogate mother Madame Valmondé), as well as their inability to establish functional maternal relationships with their own children, as in the case of both Désirée and Zoraïde.

Sandra Gunning concludes her examination of the politics of white supremacy and the legacy of white violence in Chopin's fiction by claiming that Chopin "constructs blackness generally (although not exclusively) as benign, separate, and exotic rather than monstrous" (117). Moreover, interrogating the categories of class, race, ethnicity, and male aggression in Chopin's *At Fault,* "A Little Free Mulatto," "La Belle Zoraïde" and several of her other stories Gunning suggests that Chopin's treatment of the issues of oppression and their challenge in her texts is exclusive to her white female heroines:

> Significantly, *At Fault* demonstrates that Chopin is willing to challenge the politics of white supremacy only enough to liberate her white heroines, while embracing at the same time its structuring of race relations to consolidate Therese's power. . . . Chopin also uses Thérèse to signify an alternate reality that respects traditional racial codes and racial balances of power without losing sight of the Southern white need for black labor (122).

Therefore, Chopin's deconstruction of the white supremacist myth of the black rapist, as it is examined by Gunning, is a clear indication that Chopin attempted to resist, to a certain degree, the nineteenth-century racist discourse. However, once again, we need to point out the complex confluence of the issues of race and gender, and insist that Chopin's attempts to challenge these issues in her fiction are incomplete.

Although Chopin does not incorporate portrayals of black "monstrosity" in her fiction, her portrayals of racially mixed characters remain problematic. Indeed, in her fiction the main threat originating from the racially mixed characters is not their one-dimensional monstrosity, bestiality, or brutality; quite on the contrary, the main threat is constituted by the degree of similarity of such characters. In the case of Désirée and Zoraïde, the mulatta characters are not seen as a threat *per se;* it is rather their potential ability to "pass" as white that constitutes a major threat and needs to be identified as a failure. Indeed, unless the tragic mulatta figures choose isolation, be it the Valmondé plantation, insanity, or the Isle des Mulâtres,[7] and embrace their racial Otherness, they constitute a threat.

Chopin's stories depicting the tragic mulatta stereotype struggle in particular with the fact that the mulatta figures are associated with invisible blackness. In fact, the characters are similar to the white ladies and aspire to imitate them, yet they are not similar enough, due to their "drop" of African blood. Their assimilation into the worlds of their mistresses, who often love them, has clearly defined boundaries. This point can be illustrated by the following excerpt from the conversation between Zoraïde and Madame Delarivière:

> "Remember, Zoraïde, when you are ready to marry, it must be in a way to do honor to your bringing up. It will be at the Cathedral. Your wedding gown, your corbeille, all will be of the best; I shall see to it myself." . . . "Am I white, nénaine?" pleaded Zoraïde. "You white! Malheureuse! You deserve to have the lash laid upon you like any other slave; you have proven yourself no better than the worst." (314)

Zoraïde's similarity to her mistress is thus portrayed as comparable. However, she is not the *same*. This situation resonates with Bhabha's concept of mimicry, which is constituted by an ambivalence of a subject that is fluctuating between being almost the same yet still remaining different; and thus it simultaneously confirms and erases the existence of the racial Other.

Although postcolonial theory, in the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and others, is a highly region-specific theory, I have

appropriated the general framework of this complex semiotic and psychoanalytic approach, particularly its appropriation by Bhabha, for the examination of the constructions of the tragic mulatta stereotype in nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist literature to show that this stereotype destabilizes the Louisiana colonial paradigm in more ways than by acting as a sexualized opposite to the white southern belle within the virgin/whore dichotomy. In fact, it is the invisible blackness or—in Bhabha's terminology—*mimicry* of the tragic mulatta that disrupts the southern hierarchy, i.e. the distance between the colonizer and the colonized by means of constituting "the white presence and its black semblance" (Bhabha 90). Thereby, the white authority is replaced by alarming uncertainty which results in the ambivalent relationship of the colonizer to the colonized, who are expected to assume certain values and characteristics modeled on the colonizer's wishes, but who are, on the other hand, discouraged to assume too many of these values and characteristics. They live in the "ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white'" (Bhabha 92). As a result of this disruptive imitation and its effect of undesirable (physical and not merely cultural) resemblance, the tragic fate of Désirée and Zoraïde is sealed. Their stories are thus in strict opposition to the abolitionist fiction of such authors as Harriet Beecher Stowe or Maria Lydia Child, since their hybridity is not portrayed as a potentially liberating situation foreshadowing the national unification but, in fact, as a threat to the local hierarchy.

To conclude, the representational possibilities of the tragic mulatta trope within the Louisiana regionalist discourse are not limited to the virgin/whore dichotomy or the abolitionist family/nation analogy, but are appropriated by Chopin as a region-specific trope fetishizing the black body. Chopin's utilization of the tragic mulatta stereotype is ultimately informed by Louisiana's peculiar regional space, and it is subject to the regional "Otherness" of the South in general, and New Orleans in particular. Bringing a significant postcolonial dimension into Chopin scholarship, this interpretation of the tragic mulatta stereotype is informed by "the ambivalence of colonial authority [that] repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite" (Bhabha 91). The simultaneous existence and erasure of the racial Other within the nineteenth century Louisiana discourse, to which Kate Chopin contributed, gave rise to the tragic mulatta stereotype that continues to tantalize readers in the twenty-first century by its contradictory articulations.

NOTES

1. This interpretative dichotomy of women of color versus women that are defined by the lack of color in nineteenth-century fiction is clearly not limited to the fiction of Kate Chopin. The "southern belle" stereotype versus the "tragic mulatta/octoroon" stereotype is an effective device, although from differing perspectives, in the works of other Louisiana local colorists, such as Grace King (*Balcony Stories*), George Washington Cable (*The Grandissimes*) or Alice Dunbar-Nelson (*The Goodness of St. Rocque*), writers of the sentimental tradition, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), or other abolitionist authors, such as Maria Lydia Child ("The Quadroons"). Many of these texts, however, further complicate this dichotomy by frequent use of a stereotype that paradoxically combines sexuality and asexuality—the "mammy" stereotype.

2. Bhabha's concept of fetishism is appropriated for his theory of colonial discourse from psychoanalysis, which is explained for the purpose of illuminating his motivation, for instance, by Meyda Yegenoglu in *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* in the following terms: "Fetishism refers to a contradictory belief structure which enables the infant to deal with the shocking discovery of sexual difference. The male infant discovers that woman's/mother's body is different, for she does not have a penis, and substitutes this lack with what thus later becomes a 'fetishobject.' The fetish can be any object that can serve in place of the penis with which the shocked male infant would complete the woman/mother. The function of the fetish is to disavow the perception of difference. . . . In other words, the notion of fetishism refers to the structure of a belief which maintains a fantasmatic unity and sameness in the face of contradiction and difference. . . . This implies that the structure of fetishism as a contradictory belief is always characterized by an ambiguity or ambivalence, by a productive tension that results from the simultaneous recognition and refusal of difference" (28).

3. An example of such an alarming inconsistency can be found in the fiction of Sallie Rhett Roman, Chopin's contemporary local color writer, who refused to "be forced to address the issue of miscegenation . . . in her writing" (Dixon 31).

4. The question that further entices readers of Louisiana regionalist fiction is the remarkable predominance of literary portrayals of the victimized tragic mulatta figures, as opposed to the tragic mulatto figures. For further details regarding this gender-specific imbalance, see Nancy Bentley's "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction." In this article Bentley interrogates the dominant patterns of corporeal representations of white and black bodies present in antebellum fiction. Quite interestingly, Bentley argues that the disregard for the portrayals of the light skinned male mulatto is paradoxically indicative of its importance within the national racial discourse. She claims that the mulatto figure "has received less critical attention than the 'tragic' Mulatta, in part because he appears less frequently and with greater attendant anxiety. But this imbalance is itself a symptom of the fact that the fictional Mulatto is the figure who most distinctly locates the internal contradictions of domestic

ideology and its subtext of the body" (503). Bentley further claims that the "prevailing conventions of the 'feminized' domestic novel . . . made it logical to cast white men as the oppressors and obstacles to emancipation rather than victims" (506). Thus, if we accept Bentley's exposure of the problem behind the preference of the tragic mulatta stereotype to the 'white slave' or tragic mulatto stereotype and apply it to interpretation of Chopin's "Désirée's Baby", we may conclude this examination by stating that Armand is simply too white and too similar to the symbol of power—the white male—to be a martyr. In this sense, Chopin's appropriation of the tragic mulatto figure is incongruent with the tragic mulatta stereotype, since it clearly indicates that Armand shall continue to exercise his power and not become a martyr. "Désirée's Baby," once again, reinforces the paradigm identified by Bentley: "white male bodies are spared and female bodies are sacrificed" (507).

5. For further exploration of the issues of race and class in the context of appropriation of sexual desire in Chopin's work, particularly in her short stories "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm," see Duane Carr's *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green State UP, 1996).

6. The associations of the name "Edna" with Eden or with pleasure (in Hebrew) further allude to Edna's status of a fallen woman.

7. Chopin's short story "A Little Free Mulatto" voices explicit concerns regarding the collective racial Other. The resolution of the predicament of the little mulatto girl who is neither allowed to play with the white children nor with the "little darkies who frolicked all day long" (744) is envisioned by Chopin as relocation of the mulatto family to "L'Isle des Mulâtres," a fictional version of a community of free people of color established in Isle Brevelle in Natchitoches Parish in Louisiana. While Chopin abandons the solitary tragic mulatta mode and allows for the existence of a racially mixed community, this community is, nonetheless, isolated and removed to a specific location. Therefore, the overriding implication of this short story is clearly Chopin's white supremacist belief that the blacks are happy among themselves.

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